

Big Idea No. 5: Speak the National Language

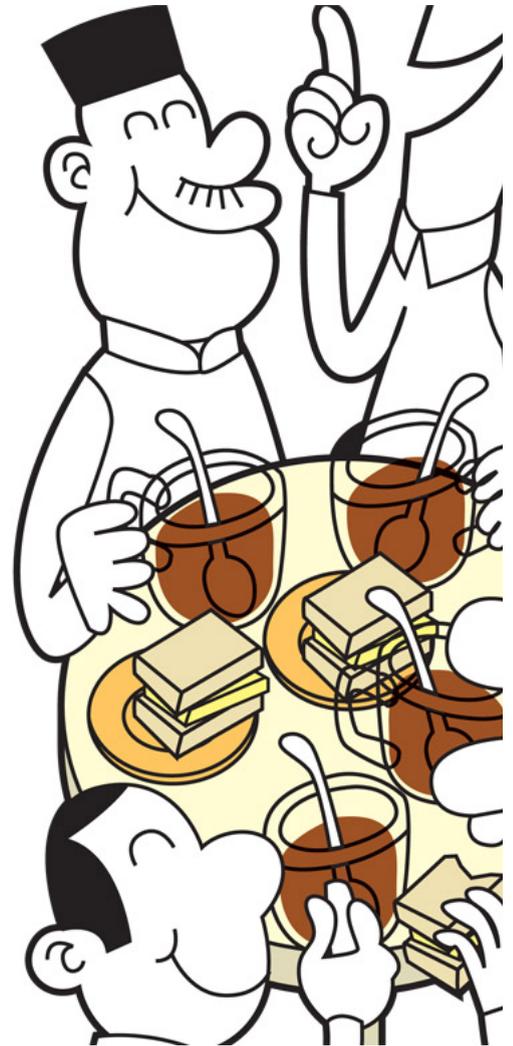


Illustration: ST

Monday, June 16, 2014 - 07:05
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The Straits Times

SINGAPORE - Regular readers will know that I am identifying some Big Ideas to guide Singapore's development as a nation in this series of commentaries. The big question that this column will try to answer is: Why should Singaporeans speak their National Language, Bahasa Melayu?

Please notice I did not say "study" the National Language. Nor did I say "read" or "write" the National Language. I only said "speak" because we should set a very low bar and get most Singaporeans connected with their National Language.

Another point is worth emphasizing at the outset. I am not suggesting a major national campaign to achieve this. Nor should there be a government-led initiative to teach it in the schools as an additional subject. Instead, it should be a completely spontaneous bottom-up movement as individual Singaporeans decide by themselves and say "I am Singaporean and I should speak some words of my country's National Language". Ideally, some bright enterprising Singaporean souls should set up a fun blog similar to that of the Californian entrepreneur Salman Khan, who set up the famous Khan Academy website for his nephews and nieces. His website has been praised by Bill Gates.

Let me suggest five reasons, in ascending order of importance, explaining why Singaporeans should learn to speak Bahasa Melayu.

Being a normal country

FIRST, Singaporeans should speak their National Language because it is the "normal" thing to do. In most countries, most populations speak their National Language. This is how normal countries behave. Singapore is an abnormal country in that most Singaporeans (with the exception of being able to sing their National Anthem in Bahasa Melayu) do not speak their National Language.

I don't know whether there is any data available on what percentage of Singaporeans speak some Bahasa Melayu. Anecdotally, I know that my generation speaks it mostly because Bazaar Malay was the lingua franca when I was a young boy living in Geylang and Katong in the 1950s.

Today's young Singaporeans, however, seem to have little contact with Bahasa Melayu and therefore treat it, for all practical purposes, as a foreign language, even though it is their National Language. Our diplomats in Jakarta are sometimes embarrassed when visiting young civil servants from Singapore do not know simple words like ayam (chicken) or nasi (rice).

Second, Singaporeans will be able to sing their National Anthem with greater feeling and passion if they know a few words of Bahasa Melayu. As a result, they will not be singing their National Anthem in a "foreign" language but in a language with which they have some familiarity. Clearly, the emotional bond to the National Anthem will be much stronger if we understand the words clearly and not have to read an English translation to know their meaning.

To drive this point home, let me make an embarrassing personal confession. Until I began writing this column, I did not know exactly what some of the words of our National Anthem meant.

This is surprising since I grew up speaking a fair bit of Bahasa Melayu during my childhood. Also, when I was posted to Malaysia as the Deputy Chief of Mission of the Singapore High Commission from 1976 to 1979, I passed the standard one and standard two Malay examinations. If despite this, I could not understand all the words of our National Anthem, I am confident that I do not belong to a minority.

One particular word in the National Anthem always troubled me: berseru! I knew what the sentence Marilah kita bersatu meant in the National Anthem but I was always puzzled what the line Semua kita berseru. In preparation for this article I learnt that berseru means "proclaim". I never came across this word either in my childhood or in my studies in Kuala Lumpur. I would be curious to learn how many Singaporeans know the meaning of berseru.

Economic reasons

THE third reason for learning Bahasa Melayu is a pragmatic one. As our three neighbours, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia and Indonesia, grow and prosper there will be business opportunities. According to the National Intelligence Council's 2012 Global Trends Report, by 2030 Indonesia may become the seventh-largest economy in the world, overtaking Britain and Germany. It will also rank fourth in consumption power, after India, China and the US.

Hence, it will provide many more business opportunities for young Singaporeans. Its markets will be strong as it will have a favourable age structure (70 per cent of its by-then 289-million strong population would be between 15 and 69 years of age, and 14 per cent between 15 and 24). It will also have a consumer class of 135 million (up from 45 million today), and a rapid urbanisation rate (71 per cent of the population living in cities and producing 86 per cent of GDP).

Also, more and more Singaporeans will be able to afford to purchase small second homes in Malaysia and Indonesia. As Mr Ho Kwon Ping, executive chairman of Banyan Tree Holdings, said recently, there is a growing pool of investors from the middle class "that can decide to get a second home on a whim". If we are going to spend any amount of time there, it would pay to know a few words. It will also be easier to drive in Malaysia with some knowledge of Bahasa Melayu.

Political reasons

THE fourth reason for studying Bahasa Melayu is a geopolitical one. Most small nations survive over the longer term by developing a sensitive geopolitical understanding of the neighbourhood. Singapore is truly blessed to have had several brilliant foreign ministers who have formulated sound long-term strategies to develop good long-term relationships with our neighbours. All this has been based on a careful combination of deterrence and diplomacy. Today, despite the inevitable ups and downs between neighbouring countries, our relations with our neighbours have never been better.

But Singaporeans cannot assume that the country will always will always have brilliant foreign ministers. After spending 33 years in the Singapore Foreign Service, I know that many countries have not had brilliant foreign ministers or brilliant foreign ministries. As such, we should develop a "societal" ability to understand our neighbouring societies and interact better with them. A Singaporean population that speaks some Bahasa Melayu could achieve this.

Let me add an important cultural point here. Since we are destined to live in South-east Asia for the next thousand years, we will understand the "soul" of South-east Asia better if we speak some Bahasa Melayu. Many of the cultural roots of South-east Asia come from the period when the Hindu kingdoms dominated the region.

A friend of mine, Dr Farish Noor, who teaches at Nanyang Technological University, rightly put it that the cosmopolitan roots of Bahasa lie in its origin - that is, Sanskrit which connects South and South-east Asia. He gives his students this example: Mahasiswa-mahasiswi berbicara sama pendita di asrama (translation: The students were speaking with their teacher on campus). The entire sentence is in Bahasa, but every word is Sanskrit in origin.

National unity

THE fifth and final and perhaps the most important reason for speaking Bahasa Melayu is that a common understanding of our National Language will be one more invisible thread that will make our nation a more cohesive one.

I have suggested in my previous columns that Singapore has been reasonably successful as a society in meeting its material challenges. However, the country has been less than successful in meeting non-material challenges. This is especially so when it comes to creating a stronger sense of nationhood that binds together the diverse ethnic communities of into a strong Singaporean Nation.

Indeed, this will be one of the biggest challenges over the next 50 years. If we can get more Singaporeans to speak just a little bit of Bahasa Melayu and in turn help to reinforce the sense of common identity among diverse groups of Singaporeans, isn't this a small price to pay to get a strong sense of nationhood?

I want to conclude this column by printing the words of our National Anthem. Each Singaporean should read the words of the National Anthem carefully and ask himself or herself a simple question: Do I understand every word of my National Anthem? If not, why not?

Majulah Singapura

Mari kita rakyat Singapura

sama-sama menuju bahagia;

Cita-cita kita yang mulia,

berjaya Singapura.

Marilah kita bersatu

dengan semangat yang baru;

Semua kita berseru,

Majulah Singapura,

Majulah Singapura!

Marilah kita bersatu

dengan semangat yang baru;

Semua kita berseru,

Majulah Singapura,

Majulah Singapura!

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This article was published on June 14 in The Straits Times.

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